

The Importance of Value

By Scott Trees

The business of photography has changed. The advent of digital cameras with their affordability and ease of use have allowed the “*photographer*” to come out in just about anyone. Certainly there are more people calling themselves “*photographer*” than at any time I have seen in my four decades as a working professional photographer.

Let's remember it really wasn't all that long ago that film was the primary camera recording method. (Don't worry this isn't going to turn in to a story about having to walk through 10 feet of snow five miles to get to school when I was younger). It used to be costly for that roll of film and processing, and as a working pro the only way for a client to get a copy of what you shot was by ordering prints. At the amateur level the most common way to see prints was via the family photo album or what made the upgrade to the framed collection on the special photo wall or shelf in the house.

I think the intrinsic value of the image has declined with the proliferation of today's digital captured moments. As with digital media in general, digital photography has fostered a new attitude about the value of pictures. Anyone that has a camera phone, and/or a camera of some sort, is going to have more pictures available for show of their life's experiences than any previous generation.

Part of product value comes from availability. Today digital images are posted by the millions on FB for everyone to see. The digital trend is to share your digital/visual life to anyone that you click through as “*friend*”. In addition, there is a lot of average work being passed off as “*pro*” quality. Because of this, I think the overall value of a good photograph has dropped.

We as photography professionals have experienced a noticeable shift in business as a result of this new digital world. Our competition is not so much another pro, as it is Uncle Dave, or the neighbor next door that has always loved taking pictures, and could use some “*extra income*” from their hobby. The prevailing attitude about photography is that it is “*so simple to take a picture, and I have a really good digital camera so why go to the expense of a pro? I am good enough to get a shot you can use*”. And so “*good enough*” has become an acceptable standard in many elements of photography. It is effecting all segments of the pro photography world. It saddened me to learn that last year CNN dropped 50 staff photographers from their payroll in part because they were getting what they needed from the internet for free. So it is not just the equine specialty that is being impacted by digital.

I have read articles and complaints of FB, talked to other photographers and even complained myself about all these “wannabe” photographers that are taking business away from established pros. The common complaint? Their prices are cheap, and it is hard to compete if you have been running your business *as a business*. If you *are* running a business, then you know that overhead and taxes are going to take a big bite out of any self-employed person's earned income. There is only so low we can afford to go and still keep our business running and pay ourselves a decent wage. But the rapid growth of people wanting to get to do what we do (and I don't blame them!) is undercutting the market constantly. One gives up the pro photographer dream and another one or two are right behind them.

In my opinion this is not going to get any better, if anything it will continue to get worse. Cell phone cameras will just get better and better, general cameras are going to improve, and more and more people are going to want to live the exotic dream of being a professional photographer because they have the gear and the dream. For those of us that make our living based upon reflex and timing, once the digital video gets to a point of pulling magazine quality still files off a video clip the game will really change. But that is another issue.

What the cheap shooters don't realize is working on the cheap really isn't going to get them anywhere. In my business classes one of the first things I teach is the importance of knowing what your overhead is, and what you *really* have to earn dollar wise to make a decent living. For most students this comes as a significant shock! Notice I didn't say get rich, rather *make a living*. In today's photography world, unless you have some truly exceptional talent in one of the larger paying photographic specialties, to make a million you better start with two. Photography can provide a decent living and a great lifestyle but it is not a field you enter in dreams of incredible riches. Don't get me wrong, I have had an incredible life and career as a photographer and would not trade it. However, I had a chance to start my career in a period when there was real value put on talent and honestly, a lot less competition. I do not envy photographers trying to get started in today's business world.

Look at it this way, people that want you to photograph for cheap, are *always* going to want someone to photograph for cheap. As soon as a cheap shooter tries to raise prices after realizing it requires a lot more time and money to do this as a real job, then clients are going to look for the “next “ cheap shooter. Potential clients that are bargain shoppers are always going to be bargain shoppers. Do you really want their business? Can you afford it? Overhead and taxes don't go down because you drop your prices. Cheap might buy customers, don't kid yourself into thinking that it buys loyalty. You will be used as long as you are cheap. Cheap goes away and you are replaced! Sooner or later the real world hits the cheap shooters. They get business but they really aren't making any money. The grind of having to produce consistently on demand and put in the amount of time the digital work flow requires makes cheap fees unappealing rather

quickly. Sometimes the best thing to happen to the cheap shooter is they DO get the work, because they can't deliver a timely product. Word of mouth can make or break you, and a few bad shoots is all it takes to have a negative impact on a business.

It is important as a photographer that you assign some degree of value to your time and talent. How? Well certainly experience helps, and having a different look than everyone else which translates to "*style*". It is critical that you separate yourself from the pack. The beauty of photography is that it is each photographer's unique perspective on a subject, but let's admit it, some have that extra something that makes their work stand out. Photography as a business is not just about taking pictures. All of the elements of what you do to make your business successful have value.

A big part of value *is in your head*. How you think of yourself as a photographer, and how you present yourself and your product is critical. You think cheap, you get cheap. You think value you draw a different clientele. There was a shampoo ad long ago that had the catch line "because I am worth it". Their shampoo was a bit more expensive, but the advertisements in print and TV had people feeling they were worth more. So guess what happened? They paid more! It was a very successful, well executed campaign.

How can you begin to establish value in your work? Let me give an example. We are all constantly being asked to, "just put all the images on a disk and let me pay you a flat fee. That is what so and so photographer did." I will not do that and here the basic philosophy I politely share with my client. It goes something like this:

"There is a reason all of my pictures that you see in print, magazines, books and the internet look the way they do. It is because each image I deliver to you as a client will have been worked on and approved by me. To start I get as good and technically correct shot as possible when I take the picture. I come from a film background and used to spend a lot of time in the darkroom working on a print to make it look exactly the way I wanted it to. I still do. The Digital Darkroom has made the process easier, but I spend a lot of time working on each ordered image, cropping, burning, dodging, and using other tricks of the trade I have learned to make my image be of the quality my professional name stands for. When my signature goes on a print or file, it is because I have deemed it acceptable to go to my client. You are paying me for my time, my talent and my experience that is what my business service is based upon. So handing out files of everything I shoot does not work for me, and I just won't do it."

Most people get my point. If they don't I might lose the business because my philosophy is that I can lose money staying home cheaper than I can on the road. Of course in today's market you might have to negotiate a better price to sell more files, but

at least start from the basis of a real world standard price list. The point is you have to educate your client to understand that your work has value, and that starts with your attitude.

Because the technical side of what we do has become more affordable in terms of equipment and simpler in terms of software, there is a perception that what we do is not that hard or time consuming. I think part of the problem we face is the perception of many clients questioning value, if *anyone* can do it! After all, all it takes is a good camera right?! We have to educate our market that what we do is not easy, requires skill and talent, is run as a business, and has value.

Part of learning how to survive in life is learning how to adapt. This is true in business as well, and there is no question that the Digital revolution is changing a lot of things. We as photographers have a choice to sit around and complain about these changes, or we can do something to make our clients aware that what we do has a value that is worth the price. Those changes begin with how you think about yourself and your own work.

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